

# Statistician Takes Dim View Of Smoking-Cancer Figures

By Robert S. Kleckner

A doctor at Mayo Clinic whom the Cancer Bulletin terms the dean of American medical statisticians has cast doubt on assertions that cigaret smoking can be pinpointed as the cause of lung cancer.

Despite the doctor's assertions, the American Cancer Society has insisted that cigarets apparently are one cause of lung cancer and many physicians agree.

The Mayo doctor's views were published in the bulletin, a recognized professional journal, which recommended the article be read to look at "the other side of the coin."

## 'Atmosphere Of Emotion'

The bulletin is published by the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Clinic, Houston. On its medical advisory board are such cancer experts as Doctors Kenneth M. Endicott of the National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Md.;

Charles Huggins, University of Chicago, and Danley P. Slaughter, University of Illinois.

The Mayo physician, Dr. Joseph Berkson, head of the Division of Biometry and Medical Statistics there since 1932, wrote:

"The whole discussion (of the cigaret-lung cancer controversy) has been conducted in an atmosphere of emotion and recrimination.

"We ought to cool it off and engage in some sober thoughts on all aspects of the problem, particularly the research aspects."

He took the position that statistics as to lung cancer and smoking were misleading, and said not enough specific investigations had been done directly on lung cancer and smoking, except statistical.

He said he did not mean to criticize the U.S. Public Health Service which allots large financial grants for cancer research, but noted:

## 'Research Gold'

"Albert Einstein remarked that if you want to know what a scientist really believes, don't listen to what he says, but observe what he is working on.

"I suspect that the reason the scientists at the Public Health Institute are not working on this (smoking) problem is they don't see any research gold in 'them thar hills.'

"Anyone who isolated from tobacco smoke a substance that could be shown, to the satisfaction of scientists generally, to be the cause of lung cancer . . . would earn not one, but a brace of Nobel prizes."

(Just recently, the U. S. Public Health Service at the request of the American Medical Assn. has undertaken a survey of research to determine, if possible, a causative factor in smoking and lung cancer.)

Dr. Berkson continued:

"Maybe the reason scientists in general are not trying to find the cause of lung cancer in tobacco smoke is that they don't really believe it contains the cause."

## Total Deaths Decline

He suggested there had been about as much lung cancer in the past but that it had not been recognized. Dr. Berkson added:

"While the reported death rate from lung cancer has been increasing, the total death rate from all causes has not been increasing, but, instead, has been decreasing.

"The reported rise of the death rate from lung cancer can be questioned because of the inaccuracy in the past in stating this cause of death on death certificates."

Dr. Berkson wrote that while the death rates from all causes were greater among smokers in the statistics from the population studied, these segments neither were defined nor selected at random.

"The studies," he said, "were made on the men who answered the questionnaires. I showed mathematically long ago that, in such selected samples, just such statistical associations as were found in these inquiries might appear, but do not exist in the populations themselves."

## 'Huge Blunders'

He asserted it "is no secret that huge blunders have been made with the uncritical use of statistics."

A nonsmoker, Dr. Berkson wrote:

"The public has been made cigaret conscious by this discussion as it never has been before, and cigaret sales have mounted. The tobacco industry and those who own tobacco stock, of whom, unhappily I am not one, have benefitted. But has anyone else?"

Meanwhile, Chicago Medi-

cine, the official publication of the Chicago Medical Society, said editorially that more and more hospitals in this area have eliminated cigaret vending machines. It added: "We can believe the medical profession is crystalizing its views concerning the cause and effect of lung cancer and cigaret smoking.

"Changes which pathologists term precancerous are consistently found in the cells lining the bronchial tubes of cigaret smokers . . ."

"Responsible health agencies have no alternative but to act on the assumption that the relationship is one of cause and effect."

The editorial noted:

"Nevertheless, we must be the first to admit that doctors do go on smoking and setting an example we may come to regret."

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